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Om de moskee - Het religieuze leven van Marokkaanse migranten in een Nederlandse provinciestad. Proefschrift Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1998, 304 p. Met lit. opg. en Engelstalige samenvatting.

Een handelseditie is verschenen bij Thesis Publishers, Prinseneiland 305, 1013 LP Amsterdam.

Prijs: fl. 45,--

Tel.: +31 (0)20 625 54 29

Fax: +31 (0)20 620 33 95

E.mail: office@thelathesis.nl

Website: <http://www.thelathesis.nl>

ISBN 90-5170-456-9

NUGI 651/664

SUMMARY

Around the Mosque - The Religious Lives of Moroccan Immigrants in a Dutch Provincial Town. Ph.D. Thesis Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1998, 304 p.

In 1960, a census of the Dutch population registered 1.400 Muslims. At present, the number of Muslims in the Netherlands amounts to about 700.000. Having arrived from countries all over the world, they belong to various schools of law, hold numerous national and/or ethnic loyalties and adhere to divergent political ideologies. The main categories of Muslims in the Netherlands are made up of Turkish and Moroccan migrants and their descendants. Following the example of other Mediterranean labourers in their efforts to seek employment in Western European countries, the first of them arrived in the early 1960's. Although many returned to their country of origin again, others preferred to stay and even opted for the reunion with their families. Today, their number still increases slightly. This is partly due to the arrival of marriage partners from the country of origin, partly to the growing category of migrant children born in the Netherlands. In the mid-1990's the number of Turkish migrants and their offspring exceeds 250.000, that of Moroccans 200.000.

Many aspects of these Muslim migrants' lives have been examined by practitioners from various disciplines, but it is only since the end of the 1980's that manifestations of Islam have become investigated more seriously. Several academic studies have been published since. This dissertation can be considered a further example of this growing academic interest in the religious lives of Muslim migrants.

In this study, I have presented the results of an explorative and qualitative research project conducted among Moroccan immigrants and their progeny in the Netherlands. This research was based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in the Dutch town of Tiel in 1991-1993, although many supplementary visits were paid to this town in subsequent years.

In the beginning of the 1990's, Tiel counted some 33,000 inhabitants. About 1,000 of them were of Moroccan origin or descent. In addition to my fieldwork in the Netherlands, two field trips were made to Morocco in the summers of 1992 and 1993.

The main goal of this study has been to offer a description and analysis of the ways in which Moroccan immigrants have practised their religion since their arrival in Tiel. In addition, I have examined the construction and maintenance of social, religious and ethnic boundaries, both between Moroccan immigrants and others (especially Dutchmen and Turkish migrants) as well as among Moroccan immigrants themselves. The problems I faced during my fieldwork led me to reflect extensively upon anthropological research among Moroccan and other minority groups in Dutch society. In particular, I have discussed the method of participant observation, thereby referring both to my own investigation as well as the research conducted by other anthropologists among Moroccan immigrants. In this regard, this study joins the recent tendency in anthropology to reflect upon the course of anthropological fieldwork, the relations with informants and the production of ethnographic texts.

On the whole, my field research proceeded in a fairly wearisome manner. My participant observation was subject to serious restrictions. Full participation was hard to achieve. Most of the time my membership was quite peripheral. It was difficult to maintain relations of trust with Moroccan immigrants, relations that many researchers consider crucial in order to produce reliable and valid results. Additionally, several domains remained more or less inaccessible to me. As intensive participant observation in Moroccan family life turned out to be impossible, most information was collected in public and semi-public settings. The consequence is that this study is based upon fragmentary data.

However, my impression is that I am not the only Dutch anthropologist whose fieldwork was mainly restricted to semi-public and public settings. Other anthropologists too, I have argued, have hardly been able to conduct intensive participant observation in the private sphere. In my view, this state of affairs reflects Moroccan immigrants' attempts to screen the intimacy of their family lives from strangers. The reason for this should be sought in the fact, that knowledge of affairs unwished for may undermine their status. Obviously, they attach great value to the respect they are held in by others.

In spite of the restrictions of my own participant observation, I have contended in chapter 2 that this method still offers advantages that other research methods lack. I have demonstrated that Moroccan immigrants may have reasons to be vigilant in offering information, in particular when this information alludes to their social personality. Researchers should be careful, therefore, in assessing their informants' accounts, in particular when they had one conversation or interview only. Participant observation conducted over a longer period offers the advantage of gaining more and additional information. It may uncover data, which would otherwise probably remain hidden. In addition, accounts by informants can be checked by looking at their behaviour. But most important, in my view, is that participant observation offers the opportunity to get to know the local context in which these accounts are given and should be understood.

In chapter 3 I have dealt with the migration of Moroccans to Tiel. The first of them arrived in the middle of the 1960's. It concerned only men. The majority of them came from the

Rif, a mountainous and predominantly Berber-speaking region in North Morocco, and were employed in one of the local factories. In the 1970's and 1980's they were followed by their families. This development took place despite the fact that from 1975 onwards the Moroccan men were faced with unemployment in ever greater numbers. As many of them have remained unemployed ever since, the Moroccan population's socio-economic position still is rather problematic. In this chapter, I have further sketched the initiatives of Dutchmen with regard to Moroccan and other Mediterranean immigrants, the local government's policies, in particular with regard to Islam, and the various Moroccan organizations that have been founded.

The main part of this study pertains to the founding of and activities in the various mosques in Tiel, principally the Moroccan ones. In chapter 4 I have discussed the establishment of the first mosque. Housed in a former synagogue, it took more than four years before the mosque could be officially inaugurated in 1978. During these years, the financial problems proved the most difficult to solve. Thanks to a donation of more than 100,000 Dutch guilders by Saudi Arabia, the mosque could eventually be realized. At the organizational level, a handful of Dutchmen was in charge. It can even be said that one of them, a father, took the initiative, although Moroccan and Turkish immigrants had expressed the wish to construct a mosque in Tiel at two meetings in 1974. In fact, their participation in the construction of the mosque was rather small: only a few men were intensively involved. A peculiar characteristic of the mosque was that it contained two prayer-rooms, one for Moroccan and one for Turkish believers. Even if such a construction was quite exceptional, the situation in Tiel in essence resembled that of other Dutch towns, where the institutionalization of Islam likewise occurred along ethnic or national lines.

Some aspects of the internal organization of the first mosque in Tiel have been explored in chapter 5. In addition to the supervision of their own prayer-hall, Moroccan and Turkish immigrants organized their own prayer sessions and appointed their own imam. Deliberations between the respective mosque boards were minimal. In essence, the mosque was administered in a very informal manner. The role of the Dutch solicitors gradually grew less important over the years, although the Moroccan board continued to consult some of them when necessary. In 1988 the Moroccans moved to another building. The establishment of this second mosque reaffirmed and strengthened the local institutional development of Islam along ethnic or national lines.

In the chapters 6 and 7 I have presented a view of the activities in the Moroccan mosque. Its most important function was a religious one. The mosque offered a place to say daily obligatory prayers. In practice, however, only a small minority of the Moroccan population in Tiel actually fulfilled their religious duties in the mosque frequently. First of all, women were totally absent; only men came to the mosque. More precisely, its regular visitors were a small group of some fifteen to thirty, mainly illiterate Riffian men aged forty or more. Younger men appeared less, whereas youngsters set foot in the mosque only incidentally. It was merely at Islamic festivals or during the month of Ramadan, that the Moroccan mosque attracted a larger public. Yet even then, the number of men who came to pray in the mosque was smaller than one might have expected on the basis of research among their countrymen elsewhere in the Netherlands.

In addition to its function as a place to say daily obligatory prayers, the Moroccan mosque

offered a place for other kinds of assemblies too. Sometimes special prayers were said. In the month of Ramadan, for instance, about one hundred men came to say tarâwîh-prayers in the evening hours. Further, gatherings with a more socio-religious character were held in the mosque, for example because of the birth of a child or the circumcision of a boy. At such occasions, prayers were said and food was served to the believers. On the other hand, and contrary to a number of other mosques in the Netherlands, no socio-cultural activities were organized. This may be due to the fact that the mosque board members were predominately older, illiterate men.

In chapter 7 I have examined the transmission of religious knowledge in the Moroccan mosque. Each evening, the month of Ramadan excluded, the imam gave a religious lesson (dars) to the men present in the mosque. The lesson was given after the maghrib-prayer and the subsequent recitation of the Koran. The men then left the prayer-hall and sat down in an adjacent room, where there was time for a chat and a cup of tea. But when the tea was finished, the conversation took a more serious tone and the imam started his lesson. Its accent lay on the proper performance of ritual duties and on the memorization and accurate pronunciation of Arabic Koranic texts. In this sense, the lesson resembles the way in which religious knowledge has been transmitted in the Islamic world, and in North Africa in particular, for ages. Knowledge was transmitted verbally and in an informal way. Men were free to participate or not. They could enter or leave as they wished. The language spoken was Riffian-Berber or Tamazight, the mother-language of most Moroccan immigrants in Tiel. Because of these characteristics, the dars appeared to be rather valued by the men who attended it. For them the lesson was more accessible than the more formal friday-sermon, which was held in Arabic and had the character of a monologue. It should be kept in mind, however, that the dars was merely attended by a small group of men. Youngsters appeared only rarely. Probably they had other priorities and other kinds of questions, which the religious lessons in this mosque did not answer.

In chapter 8 I have dealt with the internal organization of the Moroccan mosque in the 1990's. Although officially a formal structure existed, in practice the mosque was administered in a rather informal way. The imam occupied a very dependent position with regard to the mosque board. In a (prudent) attempt to investigate the social structure among Moroccan immigrants, I have further investigated the complications of the purchase of the Moroccan mosque building, which until then had been municipal property. I have argued that the mosque constituted a political arena, in which the men competed for status. Positions within the Moroccan community had great significance and were worth competing for, even more so because the men belonged to the lower strata and were remote from positions of respect and honour within the wider Dutch society. In addition to the status competition between individual persons, familial and regional loyalties influenced the way in which the conflict about the purchase of the building evolved.

In chapter 9 I have offered a description and analysis of an incident in which I myself was the central figure. On laylat al-qadr, I was approached by a man who objected to my presence because of my ritual impurity. His act can be considered an example of the preoccupation with purity of Moroccans both in Morocco as in the Netherlands. However, my non-Muslim status can only partly explain the incident, for I had been visiting the mosque already for about half a year and more than thirty times. Besides, other men had approved of my presence and some had even stimulated it. Other circumstances and

considerations, therefore, should be taken into consideration too. One of these is the fact that, as it was said to me, I had visited the mosque long enough. In other words, my presence was no longer appreciated, at least by some men. Whereas I considered my observations in the mosque as a means to highlight the religious lives and preoccupations of Moroccan immigrants and held the opinion that I had actually just started my research, some men apparently were increasingly annoyed by my presence. For them I had become an inquisitive outsider. One may consider this attitude as an example of the mistrust many Moroccan immigrants show towards persons they associate with the authorities (the Moroccan as well as the Dutch) as they had done in my case. Relevant, further, was that the conflict about the purchase of the mosque building was producing increasing criticism on the mosque board members. It was suggested that my presence in the mosque may have been used in order to put further pressure on them. Ultimately, the result was that I could no longer visit the mosque. As such, the incident constituted a major breach in my research. Ironically, it was an example of full participation, although not exactly the kind of participation I had hoped for.

In the two following chapters, I have investigated some events which shed further light on the way Islam was practised in Tiel. In 1991 the Moroccan immigrants there experienced that in spite of legal regulations and facilities for ritual slaughtering, the buying of halâl meat and the celebration of the `Īd al-kabîr or Feast of the Sacrifice, problems can still occur. In that year, the local slaughterhouse appeared to be closed on the Sunday that the Moroccan immigrants wished to celebrate the Feast of the Sacrifice. It meant that they would not be able to have their sheep slaughtered in town. An attempt to persuade the owner of the slaughterhouse failed, as did a mediatory proposal of the municipality. To express their displeasure about the situation, the Moroccan immigrants organized a demonstration from the mosque to the municipal hall. They reproached the municipality for not having secured their interests in the past, when the municipal slaughterhouse had become private property. However, the demonstration was in vain and the slaughterhouse remained closed. The incident illustrates the impact of Dutch society on the way Islam can be practised. On the other hand, Muslims themselves too put their stamp on this process. Most Moroccan immigrants in Tiel appeared to celebrate the Feast of the Sacrifice one day later than their Turkish townsmen. Whereas the latter celebrated the feast on the same day as the majority of Muslims in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the Moroccan immigrants chose to do it on the same day as their countrymen in Morocco.

The often neglected relation between Moroccan and Turkish immigrants at the local level is dealt with in chapter 11. In this chapter I have presented a description of the construction of a prayer-room in the regional hospital in town. Although its realization suggests a successful cooperation between both groups, I have argued that in reality their representatives competed for prestige. This was shown by their discussions about their respective financial contributions and the furnishing of the prayer-room. In this competition, ritual religious differences between the Maliki and Hanafi schools of Islamic jurisprudence, among others, were seized upon to differentiate between them. Mostly considered of minor significance from a theological point of view, these differences were discussed extensively by the delegates. As such, they constituted the 'cultural stuff' that the ethnic boundaries enclosed.

In chapter 12 the relevance of Moroccan migrants' relations with family members and other

countrymen left behind in Morocco have been stressed. It was my stay in Morocco, in particular in the Rif, that drew my attention to this facet of migrants' lives. There, the relationship between migrants and non-migrants turned out to be ambivalent. Migrants longed to pass their holidays in their country of origin, but were confronted there by the fact that many people, strangers as well as kinsmen, tried to skim their (usually small) fortunes obtained in Europe. Non-migrants, in their turn, were envious of the relative wealth of Moroccan migrants and were eager to migrate themselves. On the other hand, they disapproved of many migrants' inclination to show off their wealth. Both categories competed for status, thereby showing the great impact of migration for the location of individuals in the social hierarchy of the sending community. In addition, my anthropological fieldwork in Morocco not only made clear the importance of including research in the country of emigration, it also underlined the necessity of taking into account affairs which cross national frontiers and transcend national interests and government policies.

In the last chapter, the results of the study have been summarized.